



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A multipurpose City Hall for an evolving city

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Image: City Hall renovation, 1871. Photo, Library of Congress.

Adolf Cluss' architectural plan for Alexandria's 1871 City Hall replacement spread out the functions of City government in a U-shaped building that had a front on three distinct blocks; Cameron, North Fairfax and North Royal streets. The new building incorporated space for non-government functions as well, providing rental income to the city and reducing construction costs, while insuring future space for city departments to meet anticipated growth. Each building façade was associated with primary functions, providing direct access to residents to address their specific needs.

The northern façade along Cameron Street faced what was then Alexandria's prime thoroughfare, and on the second floor, moving from east to west, were the Court House, Masonic

Temple, School Board offices and rental and clerical offices. The lower floor included a lobby and access to market stalls on an interior courtyard adjacent to the marketplace.

On Fairfax Street, site of the earliest town hall, the first floor was dedicated for use by the police and fire services. To the south, the Sun Fire Company was located within this wing of the building, and included a two-story engine house to store equipment. The police department was in the center of the wing, with a muster room, washroom and jail cells located on the first floor. On the second floor were sleeping quarters for policemen and lodgers, and offices for the Police Captain and the Mayor.

Further north along Fairfax Street was the entryway to the Court House, accessed by a small lobby and staircase constructed of fine walnut and yellow pine. The courtroom, seen in this view taken just after the room was gutted and subdivided into offices in a 1960s renovation, was perhaps the most impressive room in the building, 58 feet in length and over 22 feet high, with walnut and yellow pine rails and paneling and lit by a massive gas chandelier whose medallion was secured to the circular framing in the tray ceiling.

Adjacent to the courtroom were an office for the Court Clerk and a fireproof storage room for records built of 18-inch brick walls with an iron floor and ceiling. Also nearby were chambers for the judges and a private stairwell to the exterior for their use.

The second floor west wing along Royal Street, site of the 1817 town hall destroyed by fire, included meeting rooms for the common council, aldermen's chambers, board of health, city auditor, tax





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collector and gas works. The council room was carpeted and contained desks and chairs of walnut made at the nearby Green Bros. furniture factory on Prince Street.

On the interior courtyard side of the wing, market vendor stalls for butchers and meat packing trades extended across the back of the structure, and those for produce vendors continued along the Cameron Street section of the building. But these were no ordinary stalls, as the city's leading purveyors furnished them with marble-topped tables, gilt ornamentation and detailed wooden carvings that represented their products. Within a year of the fire, the new seat of government was a showcase of architectural design and multi-functional use, ready to provide decades of service to the city. High above Royal Street, on the face of Benjamin Latrobe's restored clock tower, a marble panel was placed inscribed with the words "Destroyed by Fire May, 19, 1871 – Rebuilt 1872."

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.